



Why You Should Seek Power, Not Happiness – Nietzsche's Guide to Greatness

“...not increase of consciousness is the goal, but enhancement of power.”

Nietzsche, The Will to Power

In the quest to live a good life, each of us, consciously or implicitly, chooses an ultimate value around which to orient our life. For many this value is wealth, for others it may be status, social-acceptance, happiness, pleasure, love, knowledge, or comfort. In this video, drawing from the insights of the 19th century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, we are going to argue that if we want to maximize our health and fulfillment, the value we should esteem the highest is power.

“What is good? All that heightens the feeling of power, the will to power, power itself in man. What is bad? All that proceeds from weakness...Not contentment, but more power.”

Nietzsche, The Will to Power

Many people associate the concept of power with the ability to control others and to put them in the service of their needs and desires. But this is not the type of power Nietzsche had in mind as for him the desire to control others is often the manifestation of an underlying weakness, or inferiority complex. Or as he writes:

“...the will of the weak to represent some form of superiority, their instinct for devious paths to tyranny over the healthy – where can this not be discovered, this will to power of the weakest!”

Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morality

Instead of power as the Machiavellian control of others, the type of power Nietzsche thought we should pursue is a power we embody, and express, within ourselves. A power, in other words, that is equivalent to what Nietzsche called “*growth and expansion*” (*Nietzsche, The Gay Science*), or to

what the contemporary philosopher John Richardson called “*the enhancement of a capacity or an activity already given.*” (*Nietzsche’s Values*)

As a few examples, an athlete who becomes stronger is increasing his power, as is the writer who improves her writing, the orator who sharpens his public speaking abilities, or the teacher who enhances her capacity to educate. And in the book *Nietzsche’s Values*, John Richardson elaborates on what for Nietzsche is the highest and purest form of power:

“Power is “more life” not by its mere continuation, nor by its multiplication, but by life’s being raised to a higher level of capacity and control;...Power is transition to a higher level...a “self-overcoming”... the point to my life is my growth or strengthening and [this] lies not merely in expanding but in ascending, which involves overcoming previous states of myself.”

John Richardson, Nietzsche’s Values

Embedded in Nietzsche’s writings is a guide for how to attain this power and the first step is to formulate a goal that fulfills 4 conditions. Firstly, the goal must be meaningful and challenging. Secondly, it must promote our health and well-being, or the well-being of others. Thirdly, it must be conducive to the attainment of personal excellence; and finally, it must be self-chosen, or in other words, an expression of our individuality and authentic aspirations. Or as Nietzsche wrote in an unpublished note:

“For what purpose humanity is there should not even concern us: why you are here, that you should ask yourself: and if you have no ready answer, then set for yourself goals, high and noble goals.”

Nietzsche, Unpublished Note

Once we have a goal that meets these 4 criteria, the next step in attaining power is to dedicate consistent time each day to its accomplishment. As we do, we will meet with obstacles and resistances. Self-doubt, fear, anxiety, and laziness will plague us. A lack of time or resources, the doubts and criticisms of others, or problems with our health or relationships will impede our progress.

In the context of pursuing power, the obstacles and resistances that stand between us and our goal present an opportunity. For when we confront a resistance, if we then stretch the limits of our mind and body in the quest to overcome it, we increase our power. Resistances are valuable for the seeker of power in the same way a skilled opponent, or enemy, is valuable for the ambitious warrior. For just as a warrior grows more skilled when he faces a worthy opponent, so too resistances function as catalysts that propel us to enhance our capacities and overcome our weaknesses. Or as Nietzsche puts it:

“The will to power can only express itself against resistances; it seeks what resists it... all expansion, incorporation, growth, is striving against something that resists...[a strong nature] needs resistance; hence it seeks resistance.”

Nietzsche, The Will to Power

If we engage in what Nietzsche called “*the game of resistance and victory*”, which consists of a “*hindrance that is overcome and immediately followed by another hindrance, that is again*

overcome”, we will increase our power and eventually attain the goal we have given ourselves. And then, the final step in Nietzsche’s guide to power is to put the goal, and whatever it is we have become, created, or achieved, behind us, and set our sights on the next, greater, goal.

“Whatever I create and however much I love it, soon I must oppose it and my love; thus my will wills it.”

Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra

Or as the philosopher Bernard Reginster explains in more detail:

“He who wills power must not, strictly speaking, destroy what he has created, or hate what he loved. Rather, he must “overcome” what he loved or created. His will to power soon induces him to find any given creative achievement, any attained object of a determinate desire, no longer satisfying, no longer enough. The agent in pursuit of power does not seek achievements, so to speak, but achieving... What he needs are fresh, new, perhaps greater challenges. And this explains why the pursuit of power assumes the form of growth, or self overcoming.”

Bernard Reginster, The Affirmation of Life

In the Will to Power, Nietzsche explains that the pursuit of power is “*without final goal, unless the joy of circle is itself a goal.*” Here the circle represents the cycle of choosing a goal, confronting and overcoming resistances, increasing our power, attaining the goal, and then putting our creations and achievements behind us, and starting the cycle anew. In structuring our life around the pursuit of power there is no point in time, excluding death, at which we stop partaking in this cycle – this circle of power. Hence, such a life is without a final goal, unless, as Nietzsche explained, we consider the goal to be the joy, or the great happiness, that is a spontaneous byproduct of repeatedly increasing our power.

“What is happiness? The feeling that power increases – that a resistance is overcome.

Nietzsche, The Antichrist

“...joy is only a symptom of the feeling of attained power...one does not strive for joy...joy accompanies.”

Nietzsche, The Will to Power

Nietzsche’s ethics of power has profound implications for the worldview of modern man. For it offers a solution to the perennial problem of suffering. The problem of suffering is that we need a justification or meaning to our suffering, otherwise, we become prone to nihilism, world-weariness, and a festering hatred of life. Nietzsche frames this problem in the following passage:

“Man, the bravest of animals, and the one most accustomed to suffering, does not repudiate suffering as such; he desires it, he even seeks it out, provided he is shown a meaning for it, a purpose of suffering. The meaninglessness of suffering, not suffering itself, was the curse that lay over mankind so far.”

Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morality

Many religious, philosophical, and political systems throughout history have attempted to solve the problem of suffering by positing that this reality in which we suffer is but a transition to another, better, reality, a “true world”, in which suffering is kept to a minimum, or absent completely.

Examples of true worlds include religious heavens, or social or political utopias that are said to exist on the historical horizon. Such worldviews attempt to give suffering a meaning by promoting the idea that so long as we endure our present suffering, at some point in the future we will find redemption in a reality devoid of it.

But the fatal flaw of these so-called solutions is that they devalue this earthly reality and the present moment, in favor of another reality or future moment, the existence of which we must take on faith.

“The concept ‘beyond’, ‘true world’ invented in order to devalue the only world there is —in order to retain no goal, no reason, no task for our earthly reality!”

Nietzsche, Ecce Homo

In contrast, Nietzsche’s ethics of power offers a down-to-earth solution to the problem of suffering. For if we take power to be the highest human value – the value that above all promotes individual flourishing – then we must also value the resistances that grant us the opportunity to increase our power. Suffering is defined by resistance; it is a feeling of pain or distress as a result of being hindered in some manner. Therefore, if we value power, we must also value suffering as it is an essential ingredient of power. Or as Nietzsche explains :

“...human beings do not seek pleasure and avoid displeasure. What human beings want...is an increase of power; driven by that will they seek resistance, they need something that opposes it – displeasure, as an obstacle to their will to power, is therefore a normal fact; human beings do not avoid it, they are rather in continual need of it.”

Nietzsche, The Will to Power

Nietzsche’s worldview does not require any leap of faith, nor does it encourage us to place our hopes for salvation in something outside of us – be it a god, science, a politician, or a political or religious ideology. It is a worldview which offers a convincing, and sober, solution to the problem of suffering. And it promotes a life of meaningful and productive action, thus functioning as an antidote to the passivity that has infected the zeitgeist of modern civilization. If, therefore, we choose to partake in the circle of power, or what amounts to the cycle of continual self-overcoming, we will facilitate the actualization of our potential and cultivate the “great happiness” and “great health” that is the prerogative of the seeker of power.

“Pleasure appears where there is the feeling of power. Happiness: in the triumphant consciousness of power and victory.”

Nietzsche, The Will to Power

Or as he wrote in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*:

“And life itself confided the secret to me: behold, it said, I am that which must always overcome itself.”

Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra